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Seligman, Edwin Robert Anderson

A sane forestry policy for New York

Watertown, N.Y.

[1930?]

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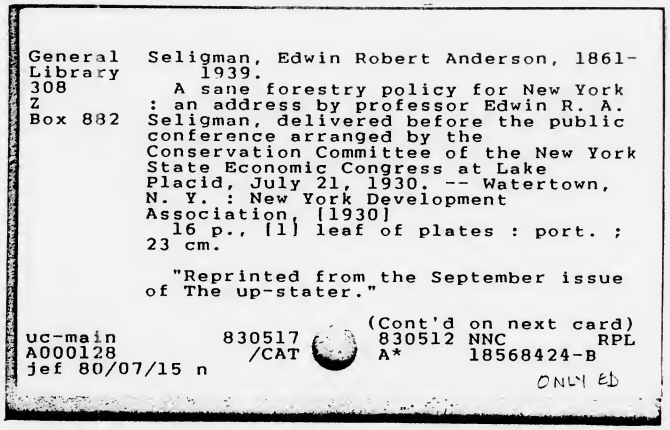

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A Sane Forestry Policy
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A SANE FORESTRY POLICY FOR NEW YORK

An address by

Professor EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN

Delivered before the Public Conference arranged by the Conservation Committee of the New York State Economic Congress at Lake Placid
July 21, 1930

Reprinted from the September issue of THE UP-STATER
Published by the New York Development Association, Inc., Watertown, N. Y.

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Professor EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN

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Professor EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN

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MAY 14 1956

The following is the complete address of Edwin R. A. Seligman, Professor of Political Economy of Columbia University, Vice President of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks and President of the Shore Owners Association of Lake Placid:

IT IS a great privilege for me to be with you this morning because I venture to address you not only in my personal capacity as one who has been a life-long student of certain phases of the forestry policy but also, in the absence of our esteemed president, Mr. Agar, as representing the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, to try to explain some of the underlying motives which have been guiding our policy. As a student of the problem, not from the technical standpoint of forestry of which I know very little, but from the larger point of view—the economic and social aspects of the forestry problem—I am led to comment upon the wording of the invitation to attend this meeting. It was an admirable letter but I think that it made a little too sharp the contrast between the recreational and the industrial aspects of the problem.

In the first place, it is clear that while both of these aspects are important they by no means cover all the different phases of the problem. There are many other functions of a forest policy besides that of giving the denizens of our great cities a chance for recreation and besides the industrial aspects. There are a great many phases of conservation which this is neither the time nor

the place to discuss. *What I should like to stress here is that in reality there does not exist any real antagonism between recreation and industry. They both merge into the larger whole of conservation in such a way that they are really not opposed to each other.* This is due to the fact that the lumber companies and paper and pulp companies are in truth equally concerned with the rest of us in maintaining the wonderful forests that we still in some measure possess in this State. We as citizens want to preserve them from the point of view of conserving an equable waterflow and of maintaining the woods intact for purposes of recreation. You gentlemen who represent the lumber industries, if you are far-sighted and long-viewed enough, also want to preserve your timber lands for otherwise you would soon be confronted by the condition that exists in so large a part of the nation.

Many of you have traveled in England and on the Continent and have seen the situation there. Take a country like Spain. A few thousand years ago she had magnificent forests and was perhaps the most densely wooded country of Europe. Today, Spain is in large part a bare and barren desert. While traveling in Spain I once had to remain at Malaga two weeks because the train service was interrupted when a river which ordinarily is scarcely more than a little creek that you can cross without getting your feet wet became a raging torrent, tying up

all rail transportation for several weeks. Every few years we hear these same stories of floods that do incalculable damage because most of the trees have disappeared and the mountain sides are denuded. In the middle ages the lumber companies in Spain did their best to supply the needs of the people of those days. Today there are no lumber companies. In the same way, look at China today where every few years floods constitute one of the greatest disasters and engender conditions far worse than those experienced in our Mississippi flood. On the other hand, contrast with Spain, Germany, Austria, or Scandinavia where the forests are today in the finest possible condition, where the industries are expanding vigorously and profitably, and where there is not only a continuous flow of water, but a constant and ample timber supply so that in fact they export a great deal of their produce to other parts of the world. The forests of Spain were in a similar condition two thousand years ago. Today the forests of Spain have disappeared and with them the lumber companies have vanished. But in Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia, not to speak of Russia, the forests are intact and so are the lumber companies and the lumber industries.

What is the moral? In Europe the situation today is quite different from what it is in this country. Our social conditions here are in some respects very much like those that existed one or

two thousand years ago in Europe when those countries—Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia —were relatively young. In any new country you need a far greater degree of initiative, of individualism, of people depending upon themselves; and it is only after a long time that government comes in and, representing the community as a whole, imposes its checks, its brakes, and its control. This country has been built up by the pioneer, by the vigorous, the stalwart, the self-respecting American citizen. We are still largely in that early stage of civilization so far as this point is concerned, where every man looks after himself and the devil take the hindmost. That was also the history of Spain, every man looking out for himself, and the lumber companies, like the rest of us. I am not casting any reflection on our lumber friends. Man is about the same everywhere. I sometimes think that the only difference between a good man and a bad man is that one is tempted and the other isn't. Make the temptation great enough and everyone will succumb. The lumber companies are doing just about what the rest would do under similar conditions.

What I want to point out however, is that we must pull together. We must all work together in order to achieve the bigger results in which we are all interested. What has happened to our social and economic life? The last two decades have seen great changes in the attitude,

for instance, of our railroads. A few decades ago I was talking with a great railroad president. When I asked him about the consolidation of his lines, he said, "I could manage all the railroads of this country from a little room twelve feet by twelve if only that man (meaning President Roosevelt) in Washington would let me." But "that man" did not let him do it. In former days the railway president owned the line as the individual owns his shoe factory. Nowadays however, we have government control. One of the big railway presidents told me a short time ago that he couldn't get on at all today without the Inter-state Commerce Commission. It is the government control of railroads like our modern factory laws that has compelled the weak and the inefficient man to live up to the level of the big or progressive man at the top. The consequence is that we are making progress. We are beginning to do the same thing in our public utilities. We have recently compelled the owners of city apartments to be mindful of the interests of their tenants. We are just beginning to do the same thing in our forests.

The reason why the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks was started was to combat that spirit of exaggerated individualism, of every man for himself, trying to make all the money he could, and letting the denudation of our New York forests continue like the denudation of many of the forests in the south and

west. We wanted to see whether we could not call a halt. After a number of years we succeeded in writing into the constitution a clause which now seems to many people antiquated. *We tied up the forest preserve completely and prohibited the moving of a stick or a stone. One of the seemingly absurd results is that now after a forest fire the dead trees have to go on standing, finally falling before the wind, because we cannot take an ax and remove them. Now why did we do that? We did that when it was a very radical step to take because the time had come for radical steps if we were to preserve the forests. That time has now gone to a certain extent.* Nowadays the attitude of the business man and of the lumberman is becoming more intelligent, more reasonable. We see the same thing in general industry. I should say that the great difference between the former times and modern times in business is that formerly the employers all believed in the economy of low wages and that now the big men believe in the economy of high wages. They have come to the conclusion it is the high wages of the working man that constitute the purchasing power of the country and that real success in industry depends upon sales and purchases. Your forward-looking forest expert and your forward-looking lumber companies are also coming to experience a change of heart. This is due to the fact that they realize that if things continue as they have been going

on we shall soon have no forests to operate.

A few years ago, realizing that change, our Association adopted a principle for which I had been fighting for twenty years but which was opposed by some of our great constitutional lawyers—and no less a man than Louis Marshall, who was one of our vice presidents and who was a great depreciator of anything that savored of socialism. He was opposed to anything that might interfere with the individualism or the development of the average man. But when the government at Albany passed the Rent laws for New York City and when the Court decided that the individual must subject himself to social considerations and must observe the social point of view; when, in other words, the Supreme Court told the owner of a house that he is not always justified in charging what he wants, Mr. Marshall came to me and said, "I am now with you. I have come to the other side of the fence." What has happened is that we are now entering on an era of social control in the interest of all. The individual must make concessions for the sake of the whole. Wedded to this belief, we introduced some years ago a bill which provided for the State control of the forests even in private hands. This bill has rested in committee every year and nothing has come of it; although we are slowly and gradually developing public sentiment up to its adoption.

Now I come to my point. The Association

which I represent concedes that the tying up of the forests as tightly as we have done cannot be a permanent condition and ought not to be a permanent condition. It concedes that the time may come, and the time will come, when a change may have to be made. But it maintains that before we accept the advisability or the necessity of a change something else must happen; and that something else is a realization on the part of the private owner and of the industrialists and the lumbermen that the new policy of this country as reflected in the recent decision of the Supreme Court is the only proper policy. In other words, when the private individual shows that he is willing to subject himself to social control for the benefit of all concerned, himself included, then we shall be willing to relax our rigid program and to modify our present position, because then we shall all be pulling in the same boat.

There is urgent need for our community to accept the principle which has saved Europe from denudation. After all, if you or I own a lumber company we know that it takes from fifty to seventy-five or one hundred years for a little seedling to become a towering tree. Very few of us are willing to wait fifty, seventy-five or one hundred years for our trees to mature before cutting them. There are, however, such companies in this country today, in Texas, for example, that have introduced the European method of

forestry. Why? Because they are far-sighted enough to know that in the long run they will make a great deal more money out of it. If we followed the government system of forestry practiced in such countries as Germany or Austria, we could abolish our income tax and most of our other taxes because it would yield enormous returns. Over there they limit the cutting of trees to those eight inches, ten inches, twelve inches in size; but as the forests have been growing for hundreds of years they have all the trees they want and never need to cut down all of the trees, because they have a constant flow of trees that have been growing for one hundred years or more. The Texas companies are willing to have their stockholders get smaller dividends at present in order that in the future, in fifty or one hundred years, the corporation which has eternal life, may enjoy greater profits.

My conclusion, therefore, is that the whole problem of forest preservation in this country depends upon the acceptance by the public, and that means private individuals and lumber companies, of this fundamental principle of conservation. They must introduce in good faith the modern forest policy as it is practiced abroad and they must show that they are ready to subject themselves to social control on the part of our constituted authorities. When public opinion in this State has reached that point we shall let down the bars, but until that time comes we will

never let down the bars. To let down the bars now would fast engender the conditions under which our forests would suffer the same fate as the forests of Spain.

Now, gentlemen, I think I have shown you the real reason for the attitude of our Association and I have gotten across to you why, instead of being opposed to each other, we ought to pull together. We are willing to meet you half-way. *We are ready to relax our watch-dog policy provided you are willing to accept this newer theory which, whether you like it or not, is bound to come in this country within a very short time.* It is bound to come because it is the way of all civilization. For all civilization depends upon the subjection of the individual to the larger, more comprehensive, social considerations that go to make up general prosperity. Sooner or later what has happened to our railroads, our public utilities, our factories, is bound to come about in forestry.

Coming to the pending constitutional amendments before us today, both of which have passed one section of the Legislature, we have already taken an attitude to the reforestation bill. We think that this embodies a good policy but we do not like, for reasons that have been explained at length, certain of the clauses in that resolution. We do not like to tie up the legislature in the way contemplated, and the chief reason why we do not like the tying up of the

legislature for ten, twenty or more years is just because of these transitions that have taken place. In five years the attitude of the public to the contemplated activity of the government may change just as many things are different today from ten years ago. If you tie up the legislature by a premature constitutional clause you may regret the action. What is needed is to give us an opportunity to adjust our policy to the changing conditions of the time. There are other clauses in that resolution which I think could with profit be amended to make them both clearer and more worth while. The same is true of the recreational resolution which is, of course, in the main desirable and in line with the ideas of most of us but which still contains here and there clauses that are of doubtful expediency. The time, however, is lacking to go into the details.

Let me close by bringing to the fore a reconsideration of the fundamental aspects of economic and social control. *Let us try to get away from the petty personal point of view, whether it be that of the Association which I represent or that of any of the rest of us. No great advance can ever come about without the merging of differences for the sake of the common good.* I am convinced that some of you who think a little differently from us are just as high minded and just as good citizens as we try to be. We do not claim infallibility, nor do we think that we possess a monopoly of all the virtues. But is it not

the part of wisdom for us to pull together instead of pulling in opposite directions? If we pull in opposite camps we shall soon reach the point where we won't have any more timber to cut in the State of New York and where the lumber industry will in the end suffer greatly. That is the last thing we want. *We want to help you, and we have really been helping you through our hard and fast prohibition. But we realize that this is only a temporary expedient and we are ready to give it up. We shall be only too delighted to do so if you will create a situation where it will be proper, wise, expedient, and safe for us to give it up. When that time comes—and I hope the time is coming very soon —when we can sink all of our differences for the sake of the whole, we shall be proud to point the way in the State of New York and to stand for the first time in the United States for a policy which will not only preserve forever our wonderful heritage of forest life but which will maintain, as it has maintained in the countries that have been mentioned, a prosperous, a continuous, and a progressive industry.*

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